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China's Aircraft Carrier Program to Take Battle Beyond Its Shores

May 16, 2024 - by Richard Sterk

Type 001 Liaoning (CV 16). Image – China's People's Liberation Army Navy

China's aircraft carrier program was already lagging due to an economic slowdown when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Technical issues with the design of the next group of carriers only exacerbated matters. The planned pair of nuclear carriers have been placed on indefinite delay, while construction of China's third aircraft carrier, the Type 003 *Fujian*, has been delayed by a year or more. The *Fujian* is not expected to be in active service until 2026.

Another impact, albeit more subtle, is that the Chinese now have two operational aircraft carriers, opening the possibility that they will train against each other. This will drive home the realization that staging battles between two fleets built around aircraft carriers is not easy. World War II demonstrated that carrier battles require a lot of skill, a great deal of practice, and a detailed examination of the technical issues involved. In short, the step between having aircraft carriers and having an effective carrier fleet is a major one. Finding "air-minded" senior naval officers is also a vital component in building an effective aircraft carrier fleet.

One must keep in mind that there is a huge difference between a carrier navy and a non-carrier navy. At its simplest, the carrier navy has the ability to project sustained naval power, while the non-carrier navy does not. An operational Chinese carrier force will allow China's PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) to enforce its maritime claims and provide backing for any expeditionary operations it may choose to make. In a more local sense, the carriers will allow China to outflank the stacked Taiwanese defenses in the Formosa Strait by launching attacks from an arc that runs through the north, east, and south of Taiwan. In effect, the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* turn the Taiwanese defensive problem from a 90-degree theater into a 360-degree one. The Taiwanese are already having grave problems matching China's military growth; quadrupling the threat axis will all but ensure the situation is completely impossible for them.

Yet perhaps the most profound impact of the *Liaoning* and its sister ships is that they will mark the unmistakable emergence of the PLAN as a blue-water fleet. A long battle has been fought between those who wish to see the PLAN remain in its traditional coastal defense role and those who would like to see it take on more far-ranging responsibilities. An analysis of Chinese construction patterns suggests that the relative dominance of these two schools has waxed and waned over the years, with the coastal defense school dominating in the early twenty-first century as evidenced by the construction of the Project 022 Fast Attack Craft (see "Chinese Missile Boats Operate on an Attack Swarm Principle," March 19, 2024).

However, a major regional power does require a blue water navy, and the completion of the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* suggests that this geopolitical truth has finally swung support behind the carrier program.

The successful Chinese participation in the anti-piracy operations off Somalia has made the PLAN a very popular military service in China, with people taking pride in nightly newsreel footage of Chinese ships escorting foreign merchantmen. The fact that a rolling program of aircraft carrier construction has followed this success suggests that the swing to blue-water operations is decisive.

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For more than 30 years, Richard has performed numerous roles as a top analyst for Forecast International. Currently, Richard is the Group Leader and Lead Analyst for Forecast International's Traditional Defense Systems, which covers all aspects of naval warfare, military vehicles, ordnance and munitions, missiles, and unmanned vehicles.

Having previously been Forecast International's Electronics Group Leader for 20-plus years, Richard established Electro-Optical Systems Forecast, as well as having been the prime editor of Electronic Systems Forecast, Land & Sea-Based Electronics Forecast, and C4I Forecast. Additionally, Richard has served as the Naval Systems Group Leader responsible for Anti-Submarine Warfare Forecast andWarships Forecast.

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About Richard Sterk

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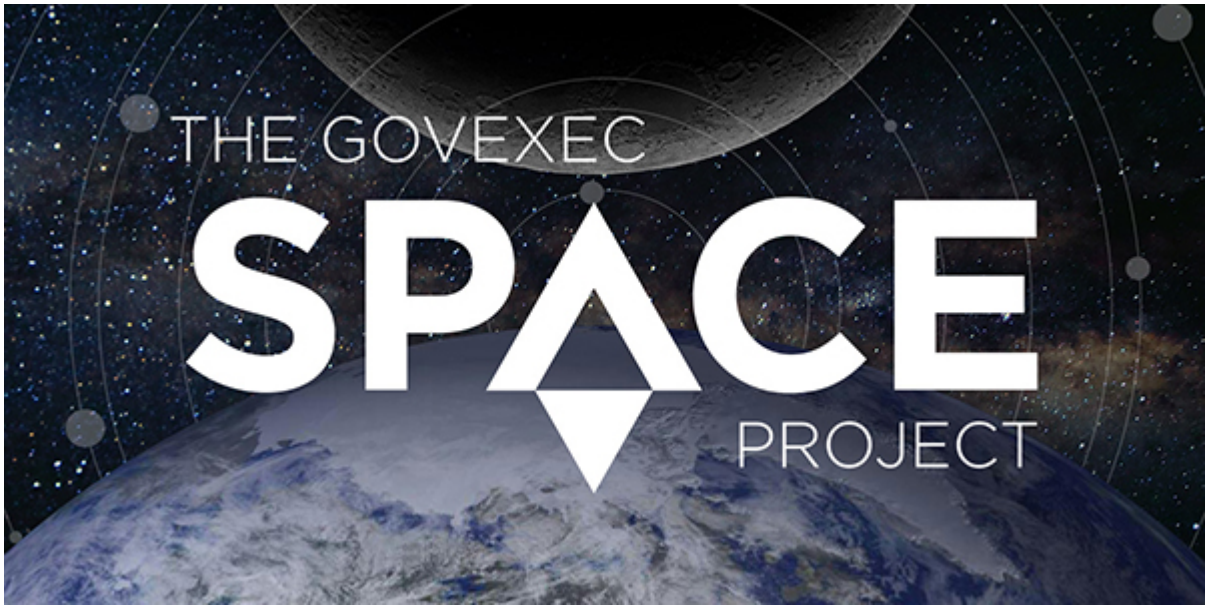

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